

THE FATHER OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Dr. William Henry Ruffner, the father of the public-school system in Virginia, now in the eighty-third year of his age, is quietly spending the advanced evening of a most useful life in Lexington, the beautiful mountain town in which he was born and reared.

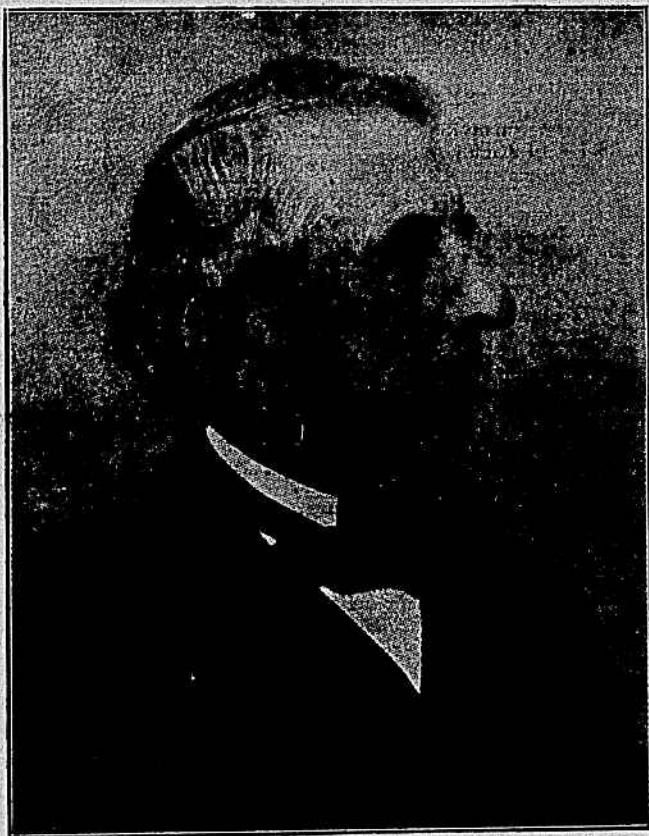
It is no exaggeration to say that there is no man in Virginia who is more generally beloved than Dr. Ruffner. All the people of Virginia love and revere him, for there is not a school boy who does not know something of the great work this grand old man has accomplished for his State. His was a work that will live and be his monument long, very long, after he shall have gone.

Dr. Ruffner was born in the year 1824. His father, Dr. Henry Ruffner, was a distinguished Presbyterian divine, who was for many years president of Washington College, now Washington and Lee University. The subject of this sketch received from this college the degree of M. A. in 1845. He afterwards took three courses in psychology, one under his father, at Washington College; another at Union Theological Seminary, at Hampden-Sidney, Va., and the third under Dr. W. H. McGuffey, at the University of Virginia, thus fitting himself, unconsciously, for the great part he was to play in the educational future of Virginia.

Courses in theology in the institutions of his own State, as well as at Princeton, N. J., prepared him for the ministry, and from 1849 to 1851 he was chaplain at the University of Virginia. On leaving the University he became pastor of the Seventh Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, of which he remained the spiritual director two years. In 1853 he resorted to farm life as a means of restoring his broken health, and never resumed ministerial work, though it was not until 1874 that, by his own request, he was relieved of his sacred office by the Lexington Presbytery.

PREPARED OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM.

Dr. Ruffner was elected Superintendent of the Public Free Schools of Virginia in 1870, having been the choice of the legislative caucus on the first ballot in a company of fifteen candidates. In this contest, the only one he ever entered, his



DR. WILLIAM HENRY RUFFNER.

adviser and endorser was Gen. Robert E. Lee, and an eloquent spokesman in his behalf was Hon. William A. Anderson, his townsman and friend, now the Attorney-General of Virginia.

Within thirty days after his election, Dr. Ruffner was able to report to the Legislature a scheme for a school system so satisfactory, that he was at once required by the Committee on Schools and Colleges to prepare a school bill to be considered by the Legislature. This proposed measure was ready in seventeen days, and Dr. Ruffner asked for criticism from leading educators of his acquaintance, including Dr. Barnas Sears, agent of the Peabody Fund, who had been president of Brown University, and Prof. John B. Minor, of the University of Virginia, neither of whom was able to suggest any improvement.

After very prolonged discussion, sometimes heated and even acrimonious, this bill became a law, having been signed by Governor Walker five minutes before the adjournment of the Legislature, July 11, 1870.

WORK OF ORGANIZATION.

Now began the difficult work of organizing the schools and getting them in good working order. The new Superintendent neglected no public or private opportunity of interesting the people in universal education, which he had always advocated, even in his college days, going so far as to exclaim in a debate, "If slavery renders it necessary to keep the negroes in ignorance, I say down, down with slavery!" At the first regular meeting of the Board of Education the work of appointing superintendents was begun. A public educational meeting was held in the hall of the House of Delegates, and the next day a meeting of the county superintendents was called, and continued for two days, for the purpose of instructing them in their official duties. The Educational Association of Virginia endorsed Dr. Ruffner's election, and the Educational Journal became the official organ of the public schools, as well as of the association. Dr. Ruffner being editor in both departments and writing much for the advancement of the work. In April of 1871 he made a Northern tour, visiting public and normal schools. Graded schools and teachers' institutes were novelties in Virginia, but being manifestly useful features in any school system, special attention was given to their establishment. The public mind needed to be informed on these subjects, and this information the Superintendent disseminated by means of the Educational Journal, monograph circulars, letters and addresses. The cities led in the matter of graded schools, and the larger towns soon followed. The Superintendent prepared a scheme for the grading of country schools, which was commended and published by the Department of Education at Washington. There was great difficulty in conducting institutes from

the scarcity of instructors, but the State Superintendent and some of the best teachers studied the methods most improved and instructed the teachers in county institutes and summer schools.

They were greatly aided by the Peabody Fund, through Dr. Barnas Sears, the agent. The State sometimes received from this source as much as \$30,000 in one year. By this means lecturers from Virginia and other States were employed, and excellent instruction was given in every section. During his administration Dr. Ruffner visited every county in the State except six, visiting the schools, lecturing at institutes, and making addresses on court days in the court-houses on public education.

GOT RID OF BONDS.

Notwithstanding the overburden which he was bearing, in 1872 the Superintendent was made the custodian of \$500,000 of bonds bought by the Board of Education. Not being a bonded officer, he earnestly sought to be relieved of this care, but succeeded in getting rid of the bonds only by drawing a bill and lobbying it through the Legislature, when they were turned over to the Second Auditor. He was made a member of the Board of Visitors, charged with the heavy duty of creating the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Blacksburg, and appointed to draft the plan for the projected college. Its proper character of a technical school, founded on a limited amount of literary studies, was entirely unknown to the Virginia people. Hence, two serious dangers had to be encountered in the beginning: First, in defining the province of the school; and second, in filling the chairs. The Superintendent of Public Instruction was required to originate the whole scheme of instruction and management. His report on the proper character of the new institution was accepted by the Board of Visitors, after much opposition, and may be found in the school report of 1872. The technical features were not, and could not be, developed in its early years, but gradually its true mission came to be discerned, until at present the Virginia Polytechnic Institute begins to realize the ideal in the mind of its projector.

DEFENDED THE SCHOOLS.

A formidable trouble in the early years of the school system grew out of the well-known funding act, whose operation, as interpreted by the Auditor of Public Accounts, was to divert large sums of school money every year towards paying the tax-receivable coupons; and in this interpretation he seemed to be sustained by the Supreme Court of the State. In this emergency the Superintendent defended the rights of the schools to the money which had been alienated, going so far as to undertake to overthrow the argument of the Supreme Court. This brought him attacks from various quarters. The Auditor answered him in pamphlets, and he was called to account by the Legislature, and had to fight before five committees at once. But truth and justice prevailed, and the Legislature passed an act, drawn by the Superintendent, requiring the Auditor to pay back every dollar of the school money which had been paid to the creditors of the State. Though twice invited during his twelve years' term of office to become president of a college, Dr. Ruffner declined each case, having given himself heart and soul to the upbuilding of educational interests in his native State. When, however, superseded in office on account of a change in State politics, he gladly turned to his favorite pursuit, and at once accepted an appointment to make a geological reconnaissance of five hundred miles for a railroad across three States.

In 1884 he was again pressed into the service of State education by his election as president of the Female Normal School to be established at Farmville. Having urged the establishment of such a school in all his reports, Dr. Ruffner felt it his duty to accept. The organization of the school was left entirely in his hands, and under his wise management it soon became a potent factor in the educational advancements of the teaching force of the State. The respect and confidence inspired by its president gave the normal school a standing which, as a new feature in State education, it would not otherwise have had, and brought many students to take advantage of the courses presented by its gifted head.

After organizing the school and getting it equipped with expert teachers, and having, as he thought, impressed the proper character upon it, he relinquished the presidency in June, 1887, in order that he might give his whole time to the more congenial work of making geological examinations and reports on mineral properties. This geological work he continued until he reached the age of seventy-five.

OWES SYSTEM TO HIM.

From the foregoing sketch it will be seen that to the statesmanlike and far-seeing wisdom of Dr. Ruffner, Virginia is indebted for her system of public schools. Every important rule that has been made in the State since 1870 in the cause of public education has had Dr. Ruffner as its inspiration, and to him is owing the establishment of the system of schools on a strong and enduring basis. In the incipency of the system none but a man of his vigorous intellect, unwavering courage and powerful argumentative ability would have been able to defeat all the opposition arrayed against it in legislative halls, in the gubernatorial chair and on the judicial bench. While at present he is known outside the State chiefly as a scientist, in the years that are swiftly rolling towards us, when the education and preparation of youth for the future shall seem to us the most important function of the State, Dr. Ruffner will take his place as one of the foremost men of his time, and one of the greatest benefactors, not only of his own State, but of the South as well.

Cluster Springs Academy.

In reviewing the educational forces at work for the advancement of Virginia boys, it is proper to give Cluster Springs Academy great credit.

For forty-two years this school has stood for thorough work and the highest moral development of the boys entrusted to it, and has sent young men into every sphere of life where many of them are recognized leaders.

The past session has been marked by the greatest progress in its history. Among the improvements are the erection of a handsome three story Administration Building, containing large Dining Hall, Public and Private Parlors, Offices, the Headmaster's Private Rooms, and a suite of rooms for very small boys.

The next important addition has been the installation of a water supply from the famous Lithia Spring which, with the aid of a hydraulic ram, throws a stream of the most healthful mineral water up an elevation of one hundred feet to the reservoir, from which is drawn the supply for a system of hot and cold shower baths and the other needs of the school.

In the school room the progress has been equally as marked. Last year an additional class room was added and another master provided, this being made necessary by the large increase in attendance and in order to keep the ratio of a master for every ten boys. The make of the Faculty last year was the Headmaster, Hampden Wilson, who has been identified with the school for the past fifteen years, with the exception of four years spent as Business Manager of the Hoge Academy. Mr. Wilson supervises the entire work of the school and teaches Arithmetic, Algebra and Business Course.

In athletics the school has made the same progress as along other lines, and last year the base-ball team made a most excellent record, winning a majority of all games played. This department of school life is under the immediate care and direction of the Masters, who give valuable aid to the various teams of the school by their coaching and active participation.

Applications for Catalogues are coming from almost every State in the Union, and with already a larger enrollment for next year than ever before, the indications are that the full number of fifty will be booked before September.